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My Politically Active Body: How Dancing Through Pleasure Kinesthetically Cultivates
Empathy, Understanding, and Peace

Dancing bodies are live, political tools. Dance performance is one manifestation of political operation and action. Angela Davis taught me that militancy can be peaceful and revolution can be kind. As society continues to operate through patriarchy, allowing sexism, racism, and xenophobia to continually infiltrate contemporary culture and policy, and as the world experiences what popular culture refers to as the “Trump era,” political art feels especially pertinent. I believe that art and research must work to upset structures of hate. Dance research, creation, and performance has the unique ability to capitalize on the present moment, deconstruct socialized habits of being and seeing, empower both the mover(s) and the viewer(s), and cultivate empathy and kindness in real time to deconstruct hegemonic hierarchies that privilege some people and oppress others.

My research came out of my discomfort with society’s attempts to limit, trap, and define femininity, womanhood, and sexuality. If I, as a white, queer-identifying female with no visual markers of queerness (in that my gender expression, for the most part, conforms to current hegemonic standards of femininity), and no experience of oppression beyond that of womanhood, then my discomfort with identity politics must be a fraction of the discomfort that people with more “marked” identities must experience. While I explicitly acknowledge my privilege, I also argue that no matter the level of discomfort or the severity of feeling “othered,” felt oppression based on facets of one’s identity is an injustice. Every *body* has the right to feel empowered as is.

As a white, queer-identifying female living in a culture that worships the white, heteronormative male and fears transgression and nonconformity, I began my process by attempting to strip myself from visual markers of identity through dance. I questioned whether there was such a thing as neutrality. Bypassing society's attempts to confine and limit my expression of femininity (that potentially could conflict with normative femininity) felt somewhat powerful, but also limiting in another sense; I began to restrict myself of normative expressions of femininity for the sake of nonconformity, rather than the sake of authenticity and comfort. I believe that restriction is the antithesis to power, which fueled my desire to deconstruct, demystify, and expose the layers through which we see, perceive, and identify one another. I intended to affirm Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity through my dancing, exploring modes of becoming, constructing, and oscillating, while also highlighting the multidimensionality of any given identity. Not until I discovered the power in pleasure and acceptance of uncertainty and liminality on a personal level did I conclude that true power does not manifest through an identifiable, singular image, but rather manifests through embodied pleasure and self-love.

When our country elected Donald J. Trump, a xenophobic misogynist, to the highest office of executive power, I felt an urgency to loudly express my emotional and physical body/self in whatever way that I felt in the present moment, regardless of conformity to, or deviation from, normativity. The agency to exist, express, and move myself however I wanted to in a given moment felt like true freedom and power. In actively locating power in the body rather than giving power to the gaze, to systems, and to hegemonic patriarchy, I theorize that improvisatory and autonomous dance invites the viewer to feel empowered regardless of their allocated position on patriarchy's hierarchical ladder. In deconstructing oppressive systems of

power, humanity has a chance of equality and peace. Dance's abstract nature challenged me in terms of the legibility of my theories and invitations. I shifted my attention to empathy as a vehicle for transmitting and offering my theories through non-verbal communication. Through my visceral, sensorial movement, embodied pleasure, and consensual physical contact between spectacle and spectator, along with various design and musical elements in my work, *Silk*, I intended to cultivate empathy and foster an environment in which humans see past what is visual and instead connect with one another through shared experience. I suggest that dancing bodies remind us of our shared humanity and our potential for peaceful coexistence and celebration of difference. Mahatma Ghandi once said, "in a gentle way, you can shake the world" (Cain 1). I insist that *our* society, the intolerant hegemony for which those of us on the Left currently use the phrase "Trump era" as shorthand, and our patriarchal structures, must be shaken. My work, while explicitly feminist and politically charged, demands kindness and emphasizes love and compassion as necessary political action.

Before honing my research and inquiries, I spent a month in Stolzenhagen, Germany, at Ponderosa's Training and Improvisation Module. In the beginning of the module, I felt as though I was trapped in my body that had been cultured against its will, and that every movement that I danced would be filtered through my cultured self. According to this perspective, my "authentic" movement was inherently socialized. This notion disturbed me. In a conversation that I had with an Israeli man named Yaniv Ginton, I expressed my concerns regarding the authenticity of improvisation. I asked him if he felt that authenticity can exist in bodies that have been socialized, and if we can strip away the layers of lenses that we learn to see through, and simply see through our own, un-cultured lens. Ginton explained that while the socialization of self and of ways of seeing is a reality, we all are born with authority to be and to see how we want to. He

explained that to acknowledge the ways that society shapes us and still tap into one's inherent authority empowers the individual over systems. While I wanted to believe him, I still felt submissive to perception, and trapped by my learned habits of being and seeing. I also recognized that his male perspective on accessing universality could have been influenced by the western patriarchal ideology that neutral is male (which I reject). However, one of my female teachers, Kathleen Hermsdorf, also encouraged us to conceptualize the human body as an organic product of nature, and discouraged us to deprecate the human as a helpless offshoot of socialization. She asked us to see each other like we see trees, grass, and flowers, and to touch each other, disregarding social boundaries and taboo around the body. Although her philosophies on acceptable ways to touch and receive (or not receive) consent did not align with mine, her idea that bodies and body parts can be conceptualized purely as objects of nature influenced my ability to find a sense of universal, authentic self. Additionally, one day during our morning practice of Qi-Gong, as Hermsdorf asked us to notice how we see each other, she stared into my eyes and whispered, "silky." This inspired me to think about silk in relationship to self and identity. Silk is culturally conceptualized as beautiful, glamorous, and conventionally feminine. But regardless of how our culture has constructed our perception of everything ranging from fabric to body type, silk and bodies are products of nature. This experience eventually gave me my title for my dance.

After participating in an improvisatory workshop at Ponderosa, led by my friend Kiki Garcia, in which we tapped into our primitive and animalistic nature, I accessed my first experience of what felt like actual authenticity. Garcia invited us to channel a *post*-human way of moving. He suggested that, rather than limit us to cultured and gendered men and women, our humanity could enable us to *become* wild beasts *with* human history. This way of thinking

enabled me to access my inner-beast, not defined by gender, color or presumed orientation. I felt no need to un-learn my identity to access my natural state, rather I felt free to embrace what I had learned, and chose to keep what gave me pleasure, and reject what did not.

Animalistic, beast-like movement made me feel strong, free, and powerful. Therefore, I began to dissect how strength and freedom are read on the body. In her book, *Choreographing Difference*, Ann Cooper Albright discusses visual markers of strength in comparing Jennifer Monson's physicality and lack of muscle definition to a plethora of other female performers that show "strength" through visible muscle-tone without necessarily strong physicality. Readable strength through visible musculature on stage still situates the female body as an object of the gaze, whereas Monson's explosive physicality requires actual strength regardless of what strength looks like on the body (Albright 52). Monson's strength empowers her to move through varying weight qualities and dynamics, and therefore she embodies a capacity for change (Albright 55). Monson's strength gives her freedom and autonomy to dance through time as she pleases, rather than being trapped by the gaze.

In addition to my movement-based explorations, my practice of nude modeling for figure drawing classes informed my research through a difference perspective. In *Choreographing Difference*, Albright situates Elisabeth Hollander's essay, "On the Pedestal: Notes on Being an Artist's Model," in the discussion on presence and power. Albright cites:

The most important attitude a model can have, however, is the least easily definable: presence. Modeling is a kind of performance and so it requires the performer to command her stage...The difficulty here is that we usually associate drama with action, be it internal or external, while the model's presence must be still, both physically and emotionally...To achieve a powerful or suggestive effect without benefit of action,

motion, clothes or speech requires a consciousness of one's physical presence as expressive in and of itself. (16)

Albright suggests that Hollander does not argue that “whatever quiet authority she wields in the drawing studio will most likely be overlooked within the connect of stock and trade of painting,” but rather Hollander’s essay explains how significant and powerful one’s personal experience can be (16). I feel my authority as I sit on the pedestal. A kinesthetic awareness of performing presence, performing confidence, even, inherently empowers me. Although I am the object of a drawing, I am the subject of my experience, and I am comfortable. My felt my power accelerates when I attempt to make eye contact with the drawing students and then notice how they quickly look back at their drawings, averting my gaze. My comfort, my act of looking, and my presence situates me in the position of power. This experience of power greatly informed the direction of my research and of my dance making: I would bring an awareness to how the acts of seeing and looking function in our perception of power and identity, regardless of how the performer identifies in reality.

In order to develop a readable somatic experience of power through performing presence and autonomy in *Silk*, I intended to draw attention to our learned ways of seeing and perceiving bodies and markers of identity. Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity suggests that we learn to *do* gender; we *become* gendered, rather than being born with innate gendered behavior (Butler 36). In addition to learning to *do* gender, I believe that we learn to *do* other facets of identity, as well as learn the implications of our constructed identities.

Butler’s gender performativity suggests that gender is in-process, consistently reproducing and being re-produced by certain behaviors (Butler 37). Instead of denying this reality and scrutinizing myself for what parts of me were “natural” and what parts of me had

been “nurtured,” I instead focused my intention on exposing my identity’s liminal nature. In accepting the idea that we are constantly in process, never this or that, always reproducing ourselves, and always subject to change and transformation, I felt free from the burden of finding an un-cultured and neutral authenticity, similarly to the way that Garcia’s workshop and Hermsdorf’s metaphors alleviated the impossible task of reverting to a pre-social self. I expressed identity’s liminal nature through choreographic methods such as repetition and development. I executed certain movements over and over again to exhibit how meaning can emerge over time, similarly to the way gender is produced and reproduced by repeated behavior. I allowed certain movements to shift and morph and to become something new, in order to exhibit the instability of identity and to give my audience the time to shift how and what they were seeing. In the beginning of their solo, *and this too*, dancer s. lumbert walks on a diagonal path from the upstage left corner to the downstage right corner, wearing nothing but grey boxer briefs. As the lights come up, I am confronted with a white body with bare breasts, which automatically registers as woman. But my automatic ways of seeing and identifying shift as lumbert slowly traverses the stage (in what I argue is already a queer pathway in that, from the audience perspective, lumbert travels from right to left while we are taught to read from left to right). The labels that I subconsciously attach to lumbert’s exposed body fade away, and I begin to see a human having an experience rather than a gendered body (a woman). After this pathway, and after the audience has time to reconsider how we are seeing and perceiving the body in front of us, lumbert piece by piece puts on articles of stereotypically masculine clothing intermittently throughout the choreography. In exposing the process of putting on a readable identity that culturally contrasts the initial image that the audience was confronted with, lumbert’s performance reminds me of the construction of identity expression. With my choreography, I

also attempt to represent identity's fabricated nature. Choreographer and scholar Michael J. Morris writes of *Silk*:

Gestures and motions were repeated, articulated at multiple scales, brought to the floor and back to standing, using compositional strategies to make what might have been initially legible within particular affective registers into something less familiar, strange even. At one point, she lied in the center of the floor, slowly lowering her foot into her hand. The increasingly proximity between parts, the tension and anticipation of flesh meeting flesh, felt like a personal embodiment of the audience/performer relationship—relationships of attention, nearness, and mediated contact. (Morris)

Morris's reflection articulates how my repetition and development of certain choreographies provides room for other narratives (abstract or concrete) to emerge and conjure meaning.

I also considered the visibility of my flesh in order to focus, and re-focus my audience's attention to how they were looking at my female body. Flesh, as the vessel that literally holds our phenomenological selves, also symbolizes our social selves. Judith Butler explains in her lecture, "Why Bodies Matter," that skin "exposes us to touch...exposes us to visibility, to audibility, it articulates us as a social creature not just as an individual" (Butler). Bare skin becomes especially significant in that bare skin, especially female bare skin, signifies sexuality. Our culture simultaneously sexualizes *and* shames female sexuality, and therefore stigmatizes female bare skin. By wearing a semi-sheer white jumpsuit, I exposed parts of my body that society censors (my nipples, the darkness of my pubic hair, etc.) But the looseness and texture of the jumpsuit brought the attention slightly away from my actual flesh, and instead to myself as a whole, including but not minimized to my visible, female, bare skin. Morris writes:

The near-nudity, the not-quite-naked body that was nonetheless on full display, elicited a haptic quality in my viewing: although I could see the surfaces, curves, and folds of her flesh, the hair on her body, my attention was brought again and again to those centimeters just above the surface of her skin, held in the fibers that draped over and around her body. In a sense, my attention became those fibers, a soft barely-touch wrapping easily around her. (Morris)

While toying with my audience's habits of viewing a (my) female body, I challenged the gaze, specifically the male gaze. I chose the level of transparency for my costume and I chose to expose the hairs on my body. Through this agency, I found my subjectivity.

The multi-dimensionality of femininity can be located in the body's capacity for contrast. Through simultaneously performing identifiable shape-like positions *and* indulgent, risky, spontaneous improvisation, my body exhibits the dialectic nature of self. In choreographing concrete structures that leave room for surprising, temporal choices and accidental shifts, I re-claim the notion of hysterical, unruly, out-of-control femininity. When I pop-up from a forward bend, and astutely stand on one foot in relevé, with my arms sticking out at my sides, followed almost immediately by about 30 seconds of wobbling and negotiation around a difficult and static shape, I intend to express the spectrum of identity and corporeality on which I oscillate, similarly to the way Monson's body accommodates change through her explosive physicality (Albright 55). Similarly, in blurring the lines between effort, struggle, and pleasure, I explore the many facets of embodied experience. One example is when I cradle my foot and continue to massage the rough flesh, slowly but surely transitioning my hands from sensitive to firm, pulling my foot with my hands while pulling my foot away from my hands with the weight of my leg, eventually smacking my foot down on the cement floor, with great force.

I transgress across the conventions of heteronormative femininity, and instead queer these conventions to manifest in a way specific and unique to me. In terms of stature, uprightness, straightness, and stable orientation may signify convention, while collapsed, curvy, and disorientation can signify queerness (Ahmed 159). I oscillate between conventional and queer, as I oscillate between statuesque shape (as I stand in a wide fourth position, my spine straight, my knees locked, and my head resting tall on my stacked spine), and circular and sensual floor-work (as I swipe my body on the floor, allowing my limbs and my hair to whip back and forth as I bend at my hips and curve through my spine). While conventional pathways follow straight lines, queer pathways veer from lines, curving into unknown territory (Ahmed 178). I employ this ideology in a section where I quickly walk in a random, rounded pathway, switching directions and surprising myself with new orientations in space. In these queered movements, I am not only celebrating my unique corporeality, but I am exercising my agency to move and orient my body as I want.

Personal agency and attention to sensation and pleasure allows for the somatic experience of power. Deborah Hay asks the question in one of her movement scores, “What if there is no space between where I am and what I need?” (Hay 2). If where I (Lily) am is what I need, I am an autonomous being that relies on myself and no one else. If where I am is what I need, I am liberated to make choices and decisions in the moment that inherently validate my embodied experience and foster a sense of trust in the present moment and the unknown future. Rebekah Kowal, in her discussion of Merce Cunningham, Zen Buddhist philosophy, and subjectivity, explains that Cunningham exercised his subjectivity by straying from the conventional emotion-driven themes of dance and theater, and instead made “movement itself the subject of the dance” (Kowal 161). When I read Kowal’s essay, I misread “movement” as *moment*, therefore

considering how the *moment* itself could be the subject of a dance. This notion (the significance of the present moment) and the power that comes with embracing the here and now, resonated with me. I agree with Kowal, in that improvisation and non-narrative movement, through a lens of Zen philosophy, does give significance and validity to a “meaningless” and “emotion-less” body moving in space. But also, improvisation relies on spontaneous choice making, which inherently adds temporal significance to the discussion. Improvisation embraces the present as the only sense of truth, since “the past is irretrievable and the future doesn’t exist” (Hay quoting Michael Ventura 24). In my making process and performance of *Silk*, I used improvisation to access my agency, in real time, on a moment to moment basis. This process felt powerful. As a woman living in a patriarchal system, female empowerment in any capacity is embodied political action.

Dancing bodies challenge patriarchy’s attempts to sensor and police pleasure. To engage in pleasure is a form of agency and assertion. In her essay, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde writes: “the white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us-the poet-whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde 38). Although Lorde uses the word “feel” to reference emotional feeling, I would contextualize this claim in the discussion of sensorial feeling and *feeling* pleasure as well. In her essay, “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde writes:

But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense...In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other

supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial. (58)

To indulge in pleasure (erotic or sensual) is to satisfy and love oneself. This connection of consciousness to body, and self to pleasure, empowers the individual. As I danced through pleasure (massaging myself, engaging in my favorite improvisatory scores, and laughing with audience members), I performed self-empowerment.

I chose specific aesthetic elements to maximize the power that my work evoked. With bright red marley floor, I reference the root chakra, *muladhara*, symbolizing strength, vitality, and the state of being grounded. Red also signifies menstrual blood. While stigmatized as grotesque, menstrual blood, a strictly female secretion, signifies the biological power to give birth. Through celebrating redness, I reclaimed the significance of female secretions, promoting menstruation as a marker of life and strength, rather than grotesque leakage.

I arranged my audience so that they sat around my space, seeing each other through my performance. My dancing body claimed the center of the space. For sound, I incorporated silence, “Unison” by Meredith Monk, and “True Love” by Patsy Cline. While Meredith Monk and Patsy Cline represent two different manifestations of powerful femininity, silence allowed for the sounds of my dancing body against itself, the floor, and the air, which represented my personal manifestation of powerful femininity.

Challenging the voyeuristic gaze through exposing the layers of identity and the layers through which we read identity and asserting my power primed my audience for maximal empathy. Cultivating and fostering empathy became the crux of my intention. Not only does empathy make dance research and theories more legible in that the viewer learns and absorbs through kinesthetic mirroring and relating, but empathy also is the key to a society that

celebrates, rather than fears difference. Through exposing my sensorial experiences and my present corporeality, therefore triggering mirror neurons in my viewers, I intended to exercise their ability to empathize, even on the most minute, purely kinesthetic levels.

The mirror system is a web of neurons that fire when one person watches another person engage in an activity, as if they themselves engaged in the activity. In a TEDX talk from 2012, neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran articulates this significance:

the mirror neuron system underlies the interface allowing you to rethink about issues like consciousness, representation of self, what separates you from other human beings, what allows you to empathize with other human beings, and also even things like the emergence of culture and civilization, which is unique to human beings. (Ramachandran)

I specifically incorporated research on the mirror system as it relates to empathic abilities.

Although the mirror system is especially involved with kinesthetic experience, the system applies to emotional empathy as well. Andrea Behrends, Sybille Müller, and Isabel Dziobeks argue this phenomenon in their article, "Moving in and out of Synchrony: A Concept for a New Intervention Fostering Empathy through Interactional Movement and Dance":

By promoting kinesthetic empathy skills as practiced in imitation, synchronous movement, and motoric cooperation, we assume that also emotional aspects of empathy that are grounded in bodily perception and expression, and also some cognitive aspects of interaffectivity such as perspective-taking can be influenced in a positive way. (112)

While this journal discusses kinesthetic empathy in the context of dance therapy or dance class, I utilized kinesthesia in my performance to exercise my audience members' empathic abilities without their active participation. In *Silk*, after slapping the outer edge of my foot against the sleek, hard, red floor, I slide my hands out on the floor in front of me. I drag them toward and

push them away from myself with urgency and force. My hands and fingers are tense spread, and each drag makes a loud squeaky sound as my skin sticks against the marley floor. With this visceral action, I intended for my audience members' mirror neurons to fire, provoking them to become aware of their own skin. Furthermore, in a quintessential moment during *Silk*, I broke conventional relationships between performer and spectator by hugging an audience member after receiving verbal consent. My audience members hopefully connected the hug to caring, consensual touch that they have experienced in some capacity. The hug marks an intersection between kinesthetic and emotional empathy, in that not only can audience members recall (consciously or subconsciously) the sensation of being hugged, but they can recall the *feeling* of being loved or cared for. After the "hug," I sat down next to the person that I hugged (that had to be someone that I truly loved), and proceeded to look around and smile at my audience. Most audience members returned the smile, and after realizing that I was no longer the center of attention, they began to look around at the empty space, and at each other. The moments proceeding the hug are the crux of the kinesthetic empathy facet of my thesis, on a micro level: after watching a series of haptic movements and experiences followed by the hug, a moment of pleasure, love, and relatable physical sensation, I suggest that my audience members were then more apt to see each other, and the world, through a kinder lens. How this phenomenon translates into everyday life is still a question for me, but change works in baby steps, one dance at a time.

Moving forward, I will take this research beyond myself. I will use my dancing body to work to acclimate people with what I consider their closest ally and most sacred, powerful sanctuary: *their* bodies. I am developing movement workshops that invite all bodies to participate regardless of any facet of identity or ability, because all bodies deserve the experience

of embodied empowerment. The workshops incorporate somatic exercises that connect one's self to one's present body, and explore dancing through pleasure, presence, sensation, and empathy towards others. These practices exercise our abilities to coexist and celebrate difference, which I firmly believe is the root of social equality and justice. In addition to these workshops, I am interested in how my work, which emphasizes agency and choice, can advocate for reproductive rights.

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